



Freed nationalists find joy, bewilderment

But they vow to continue the fight for independence

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Elizam Escobar searched deeply into his past as he greeted friends and relatives whose faces had aged and voices had changed during the nearly two decades he'd been away in prison.

"Do you remember me?" asked a man who hugged Escobar in his first hours of freedom Saturday in his homeland of Puerto Rico. There was a glint of recognition, then an avalanche of memories, as Escobar, a graphic artist from New York, gave his friend a bear hug at his mother's house.

Joy and bewilderment filled Escobar and six other Puerto Rican nationalists who came home to this Caribbean island over the weekend. They were among 14 who had accepted a controversial clemency offer from President Clinton.

All had been imprisoned on sedition and weapons convictions stemming from their involvement in the Armed Forces of National Liberation, a pro-independence group blamed for 130 bombings in the United States that killed six people and wounded dozens of others from 1974 to 1983.

In the first public expression of

into the sweltering house, where a 1991 poster honoring Escobar and his paintings hung on a wall. Curious neighbors watched the gentle celebration from their porch across the street.

"So much time. So much time. But here we are," a beaming friend said.

In the kitchen, relatives prepared the national dish of rice and beans, mashed plantains, oven-baked bread, fish and salad.

The festivities lasted into Sunday, the anniversary of two important nationalist events. It was the birthday of Pedro Albizu Campos, the founder of Puerto Rico's independence movement.

Sunday was also the anniversary of the 1983 robbery of a Wells Fargo truck in which militants of Puerto Rico's Macheteros guerrilla

group stole \$7.1 million that officials said was to fund terrorist attacks against the United States. Three of those convicted in that robbery were forgiven outstanding fines under Clinton's clemency.

A reflective Escobar — thinner than in a portrait displayed on a table — took it all in stride, watching a television report on the freed prisoners' return to Puerto Rico.

Escobar said that he and the other prisoners were going to continue struggling for independence. Escobar also wants to expel the U.S. Navy from the outlying island of Vieques, where the Navy maintains a live-fire bombing range within miles of some 10,000 inhabitants.

Another freed activist, Adolfo Matos, showed little remorse and expressed adamant support for

Puerto Rico's independence. In a phone conversation with the U.S. Bureau of Prisons in April, Newsweek reported on the upcoming issue.

"For the justice of my desire has gotten me," Matos said in the conversation. Newsweek said.

Escobar said parole prohibited him from associating with fellow convicts "as proof of our colonial condition."

A former art teacher at New York's Museo del Barrio said he planned to promote Puerto Rican art and culture to defend the island's nationalism and champion its independence.

He was undeterred by the role support that caused Puerto Rico, a territory grown relatively rich in years of U.S. rule.

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